

REMEMBERING NAVY MEDICINE AT NORMANDY

By André B. Sobocinski, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery historian

On September 27, 2012, Dr. Lee Parker the last surviving Navy physician from the Normandy Invasion died at the age of 95.(1) With his death the public was again reminded that Navy Medicine played an unsung role on June 6th, 1944 in what Gen. Dwight Eisenhower termed the "Great Crusade." As the nation commemorates the anniversary of Normandy, 73 years later, we in Navy Medicine take a moment to look back and remember our own heroes who played such a vital part in turning the tides of World War II.



Beleaguered Hospital Corpsmen get a momentary respite at Omaha Beach, June 1944 (Courtesy of BUMED historian)

Navy medical personnel could be found on ship and shore during the invasion. They served aboard land craft bringing the soldiers to the fight; and they were aboard battleships, cruisers, and destroyers that pounded German fortifications and cleared the way onto the beaches. Navy physicians and hospital corpsmen also served with the 2nd, 6th and Naval Beach Battalions landing on the fabled Normandy shoreline. Frank Snyder, a corpsman with the 6th Beach Battalion later remembered their mission was simple: "Treat the casualties and get them wherever we could find safe cover for them."(2)

Conditions for this were anything but ideal. These highly trained Sailors and officers treated an assortment of penetrating wounds to the head, face, neck, and extremities, and fractures, burns and blast injuries and served as the evacuation link to ships offshore—all under the barrage of high velocity small arms, and artillery fire. Armed with litters, corpsmen of the beach battalions administered first aid—battle dressing, a tourniquet, a morphine injection, a casualty tag—and then moved the wounded down to the water's

edge so they could be evacuated aboard the landing craft heading back out to the transports. When that was not feasible, they sought shelter and set up aid stations above the high tide line.(3)

“The biggest problem we had was a lot of casualties on the beach and trying to get them out of the way to keep track vehicles, and bulldozers, and tanks and trucks from running over the bodies that were laying up on the high water mark,” Dr. Parker, a physician with the 6th Beach Battalion recalled.(4)



Corpsmen of the Navy Beach Battalion transporting casualty to landing craft, June 1944 (Courtesy of BUMED historian)

“Sometimes we’d have four or five [casualties] stacked up along the sand there waiting for a landing craft that would come in and would take them.” Frank Snyder related. “By the afternoon of D plus 1 we weren’t having too much of a problem anymore. The artillery fire was not being directed at them. It was being directed at the larger vessels.”(5)

Once evacuated from the American sectors of Utah and Omaha Beaches aboard the landing craft, the wounded were transferred to specially equipped landing craft, tanks (LCTs) landing ship, tanks (LSTs) and attack transports (APAs) staffed by physicians and corpsmen. Each LST had special brackets to accommodate 147 litters arranged in tiers 3 high on their tank decks. Here they received emergency treatment once the tanks and troops went ashore. Two Navy physicians, one Army surgeon, two Army operating room technicians, and 40 Navy hospital corpsmen staffed these versatile ships. They were equipped for providing first aid, stabilization, and an occasional surgery.(6) Once safely back in England, Navy medical personnel including nurses at the Naval Base Hospital 12 at Netley triaged patients, conducted emergency surgery, and stabilized the injured until they could be evacuated to other hospitals in Britain or back to the United States for more definitive treatment.(7)

Seventeen days after the initial landings at Normandy, the casualty evacuation system was working so smoothly that the naval beach battalions returned to England. Although their mission was complete, the cost had been heavy for these brave physicians and corpsmen. Two physicians and 20 corpsmen of the 6th Beach Battalion were killed in action. The 7th Beach Battalion lost a physician and 10 corpsmen. At Utah Beach, where the invaders met lighter resistance, the 2nd Beach Battalion lost one physician and seven corpsmen. (8)(9)

Navy Medical personnel at were awarded two Navy Crosses (one physician and one corpsman), five Silver Stars (two physicians and three Corpsmen), 12 Legions of Merit (two physicians and 12 Corpsmen) and 23 Bronze Stars (16 physicians and seven Corpsmen).(10)



*Transporting wounded by landing craft at Normandy, June 1944
(Courtesy of BUMED historian)*

Endnotes:

1. Dr. Joseph Lee Parker Obituary. *The Chicago Sun-Times*. October 12, 2012. Website: <http://www.suntimes.com/news/obituaries/15547323-418/dr-joseph-lee-parker-jr-95-navy-doctor-on-omaha-beach.html>
2. Interview with Frank Snyder, pharmacist's mate with the 6th Naval Beach Battalion, present at Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944. Interview conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 29 September 1999.
3. Herman, Jan and André B. Sobocinski. *Short History of Navy Medicine*. BUMED. 2007.
4. Interview with Dr. Lee Parker. Conducted by Jan Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. Dr. Parker was in the 6th Naval Beach Battalion, present at Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944, 10 September 1999.

5. Frank Snyder Interview.
6. *Short History of Navy Medicine*.
7. One of the hospitals designated to care for the casualties of the D-Day invasion was Navy Base Hospital Number 12. The facility occupied the thousand-bed Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley, adjacent to the major Channel port of Southampton and had a staff of Navy medical personnel. U.S. Navy physicians, nurses, and Hospital Corpsmen operated on patients night and day for the better part of a week. Their dedication and skill guaranteed that 97 percent of the wounded would live.
8. "Normandy Invasion." U.S. Navy Medical Department Administrative History, 1941-1945. Volume I. Narrative History Chapters IX-XVIII. (Unpublished, 1946)
9. Casualties for all services included: 2,433 Navy (363 dead and 2,070 wounded); U.S. Coast Guard, 117 (25 dead, and 92 wounded); U.S. Army, 41,147 (124 dead and 41,023 wounded); Allies, 1,899 ((5 dead and 1,894 wounded); German Prisoners of War, 9,101 (4 dead and 9,097 wounded).
10. *The History of the Medical Department of the United States Navy in World War II*. Navmed P-5021. Volume 2. Washington, DC: GPO, 1953.